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Lisdeel Family Placement Initiative

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This project has been developed within the Daughters of Charity, Child and Family support Services. It is based at Lisdeel House, Swords Road, Santry, Dublin 9. 01- 8424525

Lisdeel Family Placement Initiative

Lisdeel Family Placement Initiative is an innovative fostering service recently established on the northside of Dublin. It is a partnership between the Daughters of Charity Child & Family Service and the Northern Area Health Board, and has a strong emphasis on teamwork, and a multi-disciplinary approach. A forward-looking system of building and supporting foster placements has been developed, with a particular focus on preparation, training, support, easy access to relevant services, and with good financial/practical backup.

It is based around a small residential unit for children, Lisdeel House, and aims to combine the skills of an experienced child care team and a fostering service, all on-site. A maximum of 6 children are in Lisdeel at any one time, usually aged between 5-12 years, including both individual children and sibling groups. All the children are referred with a view to fostering, and remain in Lisdeel for a number of months. The aim is for the children to be placed with a foster family in under one year. The foster placements are medium to long term.

While the children are in Lisdeel, the residential child care team works closely with them and the fostering service works in parallel, to recruit, assess and train prospective foster careers and to provide post-placement support.

Why was the service established?

Lisdeel House was originally set up in 1995, as a short-term assessment centre. However, due to a shortage of foster placements for those children who could not return home, it quickly became blocked, and so could not fulfill its original function. At that time, a review was held between representatives of the Daughters of Charity and the Health Board to consider what an appropriate role for Lisdeel House would be. As a

result, it was decided that the best way forward would be the establishment of an in-house fostering service, using a partnership approach, and combining the residential and fostering aspects to offer a continuum of care to children.

What is the Management Structure of the Initiative?

The service is a partnership at all levels, which is reflected in the management structure. Management is through a Steering Committee, which oversees the development of policy and procedures. Reflecting the partnership ethos, membership includes: Independent Chairperson; Lisdeel Management representatives; Northern Area Health Board representatives; a foster parent; an adult who grew up in the care system; until recently a member was a parent of children who had been in care in the past, and we are seeking a replacement in this role at present.

The Steering Committee reports to the Board of Management of the Daughters of Charity Child & Family Service, while the Placement Committee is a sub-group of the Steering Committee.

How are Children Referred?

The children are all in the care of the Northern Area Health Board, and reside within the area of the local Community Care Team. Initial referral is through the child's Health Board Social Worker. Very detailed information about the children is sought at time of referral, to assist in selecting the children who could most benefit from the service. The decision to offer a place to a child is made by the Admissions Committee, consisting of representatives of both Lisdeel Family Placement Initiative and the Northern Area Health Board. The children come from the general care population, with a variety of needs and issues, and the main criterion for selection is the capacity to benefit from the service.

What Work is Undertaken with the Child?

The residential child care team work closely with the child throughout their stay in Lisdeel House, involving a comprehensive assessment of the child's needs, and an individual plan of direct work, including life story work, behaviour modification, work towards increasing a child's level of self-esteem, and preparatory work towards the foster placement. Referrals can also be made to therapeutic services outside of Lisdeel for specific pieces of work, if this would be of benefit to the child. Encouragement and facilitation of birth family involvement is an important part of the process.

As a member of the residential child care team says: 'Working at Lisdeel is different from working in other children's centres. As fostering is such a big part of what Lisdeel House is about, it's mentioned on an everyday basis.' The children are aware from the outset that it is our aim to find them a foster placement, and a lot of our work is based around preparing them for this. For younger children, we aim to give them an understanding of what it means to be fostered to prepare them for when they move. For the older children, it's about being involved, having a say in what they want and need from a future placement.

Work on behavioural issues can play an important role, and our job as childcare workers here can include looking at certain behavioural difficulties the children may have, and to try to resolve these so a placement is more likely to succeed.

In preparation for making a foster placement, we liaise regularly with our fostering social worker. Our knowledge and experience of the children in our care and each child's particular needs are taken into consideration by the social worker in her work with foster families. As a key worker, you also meet with the fostering Placement Committee, to share with them your views about your key child. The most positive aspect about working for this initiative is knowing that we are working towards the same goal, that the children in our care will move to a stable and loving foster family until their own family is able to care for them again.

Throughout the child's stay in Lisdeel, they have ongoing contact with the fostering team, and are able to become involved in their own fostering process, by asking questions, expressing any anxieties and talking about what is important to them about a future foster family.

What is the Role of the Child's Family?

There is a strong emphasis on working in partnership with the child's family from the earliest stages. Before a child arrives in Lisdeel, the family is invited to visit Lisdeel, and meet the relevant people, so they have a clear idea as to what is involved. An information pack has been specially written for them, giving basic information, and also inviting them to remain involved with their child, and to work with us in the child's best interests.

While the child is in Lisdeel, family contact is facilitated and encouraged. In addition, the family is invited to meet the fostering social worker, to discuss their views about their child's placement and to share any anxieties or concerns they may have. This happens on an ongoing basis.

Families are fully informed as to what is happening for their child at all stages. They are invited to meet the prospective foster carers for their child, to establish as positive a working relationship between them as is possible, in the interests of the child, which can continue post-placement.

Once a child moves to a foster family, contact with birth family members is encouraged and facilitated for the duration of the placement.

How are Foster Carers Recruited?

All foster carers are recruited directly by the Initiative. There is a very active recruitment policy, involving several campaigns a year. There is an emphasis on openness and flexibility. Families and individuals are welcome to apply. Recruitment campaigns have involved newspaper advertising, newspaper article, local radio, targeted advertising and parish newsletters. We have found an encouraging level of interest among prospective foster carers, and have had a total of 41 applications to date.

What Preparation/Training is Available?

In addition to a comprehensive individual assessment, foster carers also take part in a group-training course. This gives them the opportunity to further explore what is involved in fostering. It also helps them make an informed decision as to whether fostering would work well in their circumstances. Training continues post-placement also, focusing on such issues as behavioural difficulties and parenting children with sexualized behaviour.

What Supports are Available to Foster Carers Post-Placement?

Very high levels of post-placement supports have been developed, which are integrated and multi-faceted. These can include:

- Individual support by Lisdeel Social Worker
- Support from child's Health Board Social Worker
- Support from Lisdeel Resource Worker
- 24hr support for emergencies
- Rapid access to therapeutic help when needed
- Support system for foster carers' own children
- System of financial supports which is realistic and 'user friendly'.
- Commitment to teamwork & partnership

- Commitment to communication and information sharing
- Overall emphasis on availability & responsiveness

Because of the planned and structured approach to the work, to date we are finding very little use is being made by our foster carers of our emergency support network.

Is Respite available for Foster Carers?

Respite is integrated into the system as a whole, from the beginning. Lisdeel recruits foster carers specifically for Respite, and they go through a comprehensive assessment procedure, and similar level of training as the long-term foster carers. We have found there is a significant level of interest in Respite among prospective foster carers, in that many people would like to foster, yet find that their family circumstances would not be compatible with offering a long-term foster placement to a child.

In addition to playing a very important post-placement role, Respite foster carers may be linked to a particular child/children while they are still in their residential placement in Lisdeel, in a preparation role for fostering. An example of this was a child, aged 7, who had been in another residential unit since he was 3, and so had little perception of ordinary family life. His involvement with his Respite family while he was still in Lisdeel played an important role in preparing him for his move to his long-term foster family. A key aspect to this is that the same Respite family remains involved with him post-placement, thereby offering him continuity and stability, so he does not experience another loss in his life.

The service is being evaluated by means of a comprehensive research programme over two and a half years, by the Children's Research Centre, Trinity College, Dublin. Completion of this review is expected in the Summer 2002.